

China's Participation in Anti-Piracy Operations off the Horn of Africa: Drivers and Implications

Conference Report

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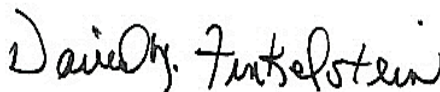
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Introduction

In December 2008, the navy of the People's Republic of China (People's Liberation Army Navy, or PLAN) deployed a task force, made up of two guided missile destroyers and a supply ship, to participate in international anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia, in the Gulf of Aden/Horn of Africa (HoA) region. This deployment marked the first time in modern history that China's navy has engaged in an operational mission outside of its claimed territorial waters. The PLAN's participation in international anti-piracy operations has been viewed by many in the United States and elsewhere as an indication of China's apparent willingness to take on a larger military role on the global stage.

On March 20, 2009, CNA China Studies hosted a half-day conference to discuss China's anti-piracy activities. Bringing together U.S. officials, analysts, and active-duty military personnel, the conference examined the reasons that piracy has become a problem in the Gulf of Aden/HoA region; the drivers for China's unprecedented naval participation in international anti-piracy efforts; the implications that this participation has for China's navy; and the potential implications that it has for the United States.

This report first outlines four major themes discussed throughout the conference. It then turns to a more detailed discussion of each of the conference's three panels.

Figure 1: The Gulf of Aden/Horn of Africa Region¹



¹ http://www.reliefweb.int/mapc/afr_ne/reg/hornofafrica.html

Themes

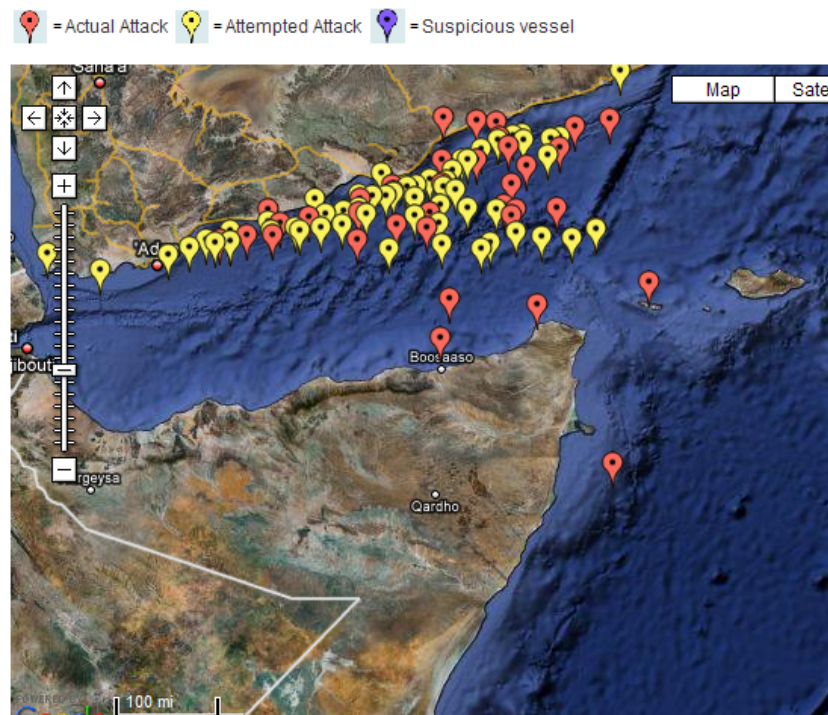
Piracy in the Horn of Africa region is a growing problem, but its scale should not be overstated.

Speakers cautioned that, while piracy is a serious problem in the region – with 120 confirmed attacks and 43 ships taken in 2008 – it still affects fewer than one-half of one percent of total transits through the area. Several panelists also noted that it is difficult to measure the true impact of piracy on the global shipping industry, and that the economic effects may be relatively minimal. However, when we also consider the psychological strain on ship crews and the political implications of local governments allowing piracy to flourish (discussed below), the problem looms far larger.

Curbing piracy is, ultimately, a political dilemma as much as it is a military one.

Participants stressed that, while national militaries have an important role to play in preventing future pirate attacks and stopping those already underway, in the long term the problem can only be solved with an infusion of strong political will. Several speakers blamed the persistence of pirate activity on the combined factors of Somalia's near-total dearth of domestic governance, the inability or unwillingness of Somali power holders to bring known pirates to justice, and a lack of international consensus on how to deal with perpetrators.

Figure 2: Pirate Attacks in 2008²



²http://www.iccccs.org/index.php?option=com_fabrik&view=visualization&controller=visualization.googlemap&Itemid=89

Contributing to anti-piracy operations can bring recognition and prestige to participating nations.

Several participants noted that a desire to enhance international prestige may be one driver for many countries' participation in anti-piracy operations. Piracy affects the trade and security interests of many nations, and thus participation in HoA anti-piracy operations has become one way for a

country to signal both its willingness and its ability to cooperate in issues of international concern. Currently at least a dozen national navies have deployed to the region, in addition to the several multinational coalitions operating there. In a sense, panelists suggested, there is a bandwagon effect: the greater the number of nations that send ships to the region, the more additional nations will also feel compelled to participate in anti-piracy operations.

How has China been participating in international anti-piracy efforts?

At present, more than a dozen nations have sent ships to patrol the Gulf of Aden/Horn of Africa region. A number of these are participating in Combined Task Forces 150 and 151 (CTF-150 and -151), under the multi-national Combined Maritime Forces (CMF). The EU and NATO have also provided their own combined maritime task groups to the region—these are not part of the CMF, but they do coordinate with it. A number of other nations, including Russia, China, India, and Malaysia, have sent naval forces operating under national tasking to the region to protect their vessels and crews from pirates. On average, one speaker said, there are 14 naval vessels patrolling the Gulf of Aden at any given time, in a combination of coalition and non-coalition forces.

China has not joined any coalition, and its stated primary goal in deploying PLAN vessels is “safeguarding and providing security for Chinese vessels and personnel sailing through the region.” Although China has not joined a coalition, officials from China’s Ministry of National Defense (MND) have said that China is “willing to strengthen intelligence and information exchanges and, when necessary, take part in humanitarian relief operations with all countries, including the United States.”³ MND officials have also made clear that the decision to deploy naval vessels to the Gulf of Aden/Horn of Africa region was “adopted on the basis of a UN resolution,” and that China “advocates strengthening the leadership and coordination function of the United Nations” in addressing piracy.

³ All quoted comments are from the transcript of China’s Ministry of National Defense news conference, 23 December 2008; <http://military.people.com.cn/GB/1076/52984/8565326.html>.

China's participation in international anti-piracy operations represents a significant shift both in the scope of its national security interests and in its apparent willingness to take on a larger military role on the global stage.

Speakers discussed several inferences that could be drawn from China's unprecedented participation in anti-piracy operations. First, they noted, China's willingness to send warships far outside its territorial waters signals a shift in its definition of its national security interests. Taken in conjunction with other official Chinese military and government statements, panelists surmised, China's anti-piracy operations may be seen as part of a longer-term movement toward tasking the PLA and the PLAN with expanded missions aimed at protecting a more diverse set of national interests that are not defined by geography – including protecting economic interests, preventing terrorism, delivering humanitarian aid, and conducting other Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW).

Second, some participants suggested, China's unprecedented cooperation with (though not formal participation in) the CMF anti-piracy task forces displays a new-found willingness to cooperate with

other militaries and governments on issues of mutual concern. By showing itself eager to be seen as a "responsible stakeholder" in resolving global issues, China may be opening the door for other cooperative efforts in the future.

China's naval cooperation in anti-piracy operations has, for the most part, been welcomed by the United States military.

Panelists from a wide range of U.S. institutions expressed enthusiasm for the PLAN's participation in anti-piracy operations. China's willingness to maintain open communications and share information with the United States (and, more generally, with the CMF anti-piracy task force) has allowed for unprecedented daily communication between the tactical and operational levels of both militaries, in contrast to the occasional and high-level diplomatic platforms on which military-to-military relations are usually conducted. Speakers acknowledged that there were some risks associated with closer contact, and some expressed reservations about whether China's navy is gaining more from this contact than is the U.S. Navy. But, in general, the benefits of this closer contact were seen to outweigh the potential costs.

Panel One: Setting the Stage – An Overview of Piracy off the Horn of Africa

The presentations of the first panel provided context for China's participation in anti-piracy operations in the Horn of Africa region. They included discussions of both why piracy has escalated in the region in recent years, and how China is affected by this escalation. The presentations addressed the following questions:

Why have pirates been relatively successful in this region?

Panelists identified a number of factors that may contribute to piracy. One speaker, comparing the HoA region to another well-known pirate haven, the Strait of Malacca, suggested that there are seven primary factors that foster piracy. He noted that these factors exist to differing degrees in the two regions, which may help to explain why efforts to curb piracy in the Strait of Malacca have, thus far, been more successful than efforts off the Horn of Africa. Most importantly, the speaker said, whereas

"If I had to choose one word to describe the difference between piracy off the Horn of Africa and elsewhere it would be – *sanctuary*."

other regions, such as the mangrove swamps of the Niger Delta, may offer pirates safe havens in terms of geography, the HoA region offers them *political sanctuary* in a number of ways. These include the weakness or outright failure of Somalia's state apparatus, the insufficient judicial capacity of neighboring states to bring pirates to justice, and the ineffectiveness of international pressure on Somali

power-holders. By contrast, the Strait of Malacca is surrounded by multiple states with robust sovereignty, some of which have expressed a strong interest in curbing piracy, and on which effective international pressure could be levied.

Seven Factors Fostering Piracy

- "Conflict and disorder" in the governments and societies of nearby nations
- Favorable geography in neighboring waters
- A maritime tradition
- Financial reward
- Legal opportunity (i.e., is there effective legislation in place to help curb piracy?)
- Permissive political environment
- Inadequate security for ships passing through the region

These issues underscore the fact that, as several panelists pointed out, *piracy is, at root, a political problem* – that is, it reflects the failure of land-based political regimes to control crime and lawlessness on their peripheries and to shut down long-standing criminal networks. Participants noted, for instance, that the Somali pirates are probably aided by actors in Yemen and elsewhere in the region. Panelists argued that the ability to curb piracy in the long term is largely dependent on the political will and capacity of nearby states to establish coherent anti-piracy legislation and to bring perpetrators to justice. As one speaker put it, "the solution is ashore in Somalia," not at sea.

Ultimately, the speakers noted, *legal measures* will be one of the most important factors in curtailing piracy. The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) codified anti-piracy law in 1982, and the UN Security Council adopted four resolutions (UN Resolutions 1816, 1838, 1846, and 1851) that called upon states with sufficient capacity to take active part in anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia – in particular by deploying naval vessels and military aircraft.

Several panelists suggested that the ability of concerned nations to curb pirate attacks and arrest their perpetrators is hampered by several legal factors, including:

- the inadequacy or weakness of domestic legislation in neighboring countries
- the unwillingness of many of these nations to adjudicate piracy cases
- the lack of implementation of existing international laws that deal with piracy.

What international efforts are being undertaken to stop piracy?

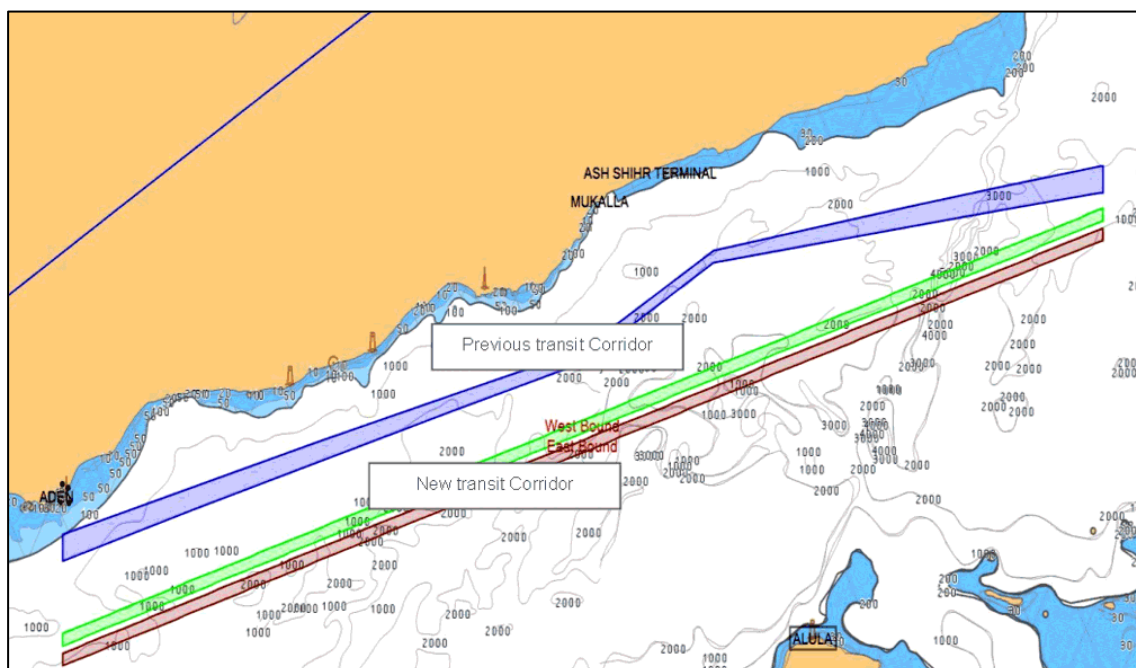
If piracy is largely a political and legal problem, does this mean that there is no role for national navies in curbing piracy? No. Speakers agreed that – particularly in the absence of political consensus among neighboring nations – naval power may

be the *only* tool currently available to counter pirate attacks. Navies cannot end the political problems that allow piracy to flourish, but they can help in three ways:

- By significantly increasing the costs of piracy to its perpetrators, through actions such as boarding suspected pirate ships, intervening in attacks already underway, and providing surveillance of and communication with ships that have been captured.
- By increasing the defensive capacities of commercial and humanitarian aid ships through, for instance, providing warnings of nearby pirate activity and developing group transit plans.
- By cooperating with other national navies through coordination, deconfliction of national anti-piracy missions, and legal cooperation. As one example of effective international cooperation, a panelist cited the Internationally Recognized Transit Corridor (IRTC). Established by the Coalition Maritime Forces in 2008, the IRTC established a new transit corridor through the Gulf of Aden that funnels merchant and civilian traffic into a smaller area, thus enabling a limited number of warships to protect a greater number of merchant vessels.

“To stop piracy we would need to increase the risks that pirates face.”

Figure 3: Revised Transit Corridor, Effective 1 Feb 2009
 (Promulgated in coordination with the EU and United Kingdom Maritime Trade Organisation [UKMTO])⁴



In addition, industry itself has taken significant defensive actions against piracy to make its ships less vulnerable. These include increasing evasive maneuvers, communicating transit plans to local law enforcement professionals, and developing pre-planned responses to attacks. One panelist noted that a number of international industries have cooperated to publish a region-specific set of industry best practices for deterring pirate attacks.

How are China's interests affected by piracy in the region?

Finally, the panel discussed the ways that regional piracy affects China in particular. One participant suggested that while China's participation in anti-piracy actions clearly reflects a desire to protect her economic interests in the region, it also signals a set of concerns about

China's national image if it does *not* participate. The speaker noted that China's perceived inability to protect its vessels may be viewed as a blow to national pride, as would be the reliance on foreign ships to protect its own. (In one case prior to PLAN deployment to the HOA region, a PRC ship was forced to rely on assistance from the Malaysian navy to drive off a pirate attack.) Participating in anti-piracy missions, conversely, displays both the *ability* of the PLAN to carry out a mission far from home, and the *willingness* of China's government to "active[ly] fulfill ... its international obligations" to help control piracy in the region, as the PLAN Deputy Chief of Staff said in 2008.⁵ This theme was echoed in the next panel as well.

⁴ Source: Combined Maritime Forces

⁵ China's Ministry of National Defense news conference, 23 December 2008; <http://military.people.com.cn/GB/1076/52984/8565326.html>

China's economic interests in the Gulf of Aden/Horn of Africa region

Trade with Africa: China imports key resources, such as oil, gas, metals, and minerals, from the African continent – much of which passes through the Gulf of Aden/HOA region.

Trade with the EU: The EU is China's largest trading partner; China, the EU's second largest. Much of this trade passes through the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Indian Ocean – all in the HOA region.

Energy imports: China currently imports half its oil, of which approximately a third – or 16% of its total energy needs – comes from Africa. As China's hunger for imported oil rises, the HOA is likely to remain a key transit route, making piracy in the region an ever- more-pressing threat.

Fisheries: China's fishing fleet has interests in the rich waters off the Horn of Africa, and at least one of its fishing vessels has been attacked by pirates.

Panel Two: Implications for China

The speakers on Panel Two highlighted the drivers for and operational implications of China's unprecedented participation in anti-piracy operations. They raised the following points:

China's participation in these operations is truly something new, and therefore significant.

Speakers noted that this is the PLAN's first operational deployment of combat vessels outside China's littoral waters. The deployment presents both logistical and diplomatic challenges: logistically, this is the first time that the PLAN has had forces operating for an extended period of time at a great distance from home; diplomatically, this is the first time that a PLAN task group has cooperated with international naval forces on an operational mission. The PLAN task group is also partly reliant on foreign sources for logistics support.

China's participation signals an expansion of China's national security interests, a point which is concordant with other recent statements from China's government and military.

The panelists noted that the use of PLAN warships in the Gulf of Aden/Horn of Africa region serves at least three purposes:

First, it signals China's desire to be seen as a *willing partner in international cooperative efforts*. In other words, the PLAN is being used as a diplomatic vehicle, to demonstrate China's intention to act as a "responsible stakeholder" in the global arena. China's stated

commitment in other venues to help "safeguard world peace and promote common development" through participation in international security activities is qualified by its declaration that these activities must be UN-led, multilateral operations – such as international peacekeeping, or the current anti-piracy operations.⁶ Thus China may be indicating that its expanded military operations should be viewed as cooperative rather than competitive – or, as one panelist put it, that China's use of the PLAN as a diplomatic vehicle need not pose a zero-sum situation for the United States or other countries.

Second, it proclaims China's intentions and ability to militarily defend its *expanding, globalizing national interests*. Both panelists noted that since the early 2000s, various official Chinese publications and speeches have suggested that China's national interests are expanding geographically. From the promulgation of China's "Go Out" policy at the turn of the 21st century, which called for Chinese firms to invest, sell, and acquire natural resources abroad, to an increased attention to Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) in China's 2008 Defense White Paper (published in January 2009), China has proclaimed that its national security

⁶ The General Political Department of the PLA, "Lesson Five: Giving Play to the Importance of Safeguarding World Peace and Promoting Common Development" ("Di Wu Jiang: Weihe Shijie Heping yu Cujin Gongtong Fazhan Fahui Zhongyao Zuoyong"), National Defense Education website of Yichun City, Jiangxi, (June 2006), http://www.ycgfjy.com/Article_show.asp?ArticleID=2284.

interests – and its national interests more broadly – are increasingly defined well outside of China’s immediate neighborhood.

One panelist suggested that China’s anti-piracy operations demonstrate the PLA’s intention of carrying out the missions with which it was tasked by President Hu Jintao in 2004. These missions, known as the “New Historic Missions,” comprise four short, authoritative statements that define the future tasks of the Chinese military, and, in this speaker’s view, reflect changes in China’s assessment of its security situation. Particularly notable, said this panelist, is the content of the third and fourth missions – “safeguarding China’s national interests” and “upholding world peace and promoting mutual development.” The New Historic Missions specifically define China’s national interests as going beyond “the security of our territorial land, seas, and airspace,” into realms including

The “Historic Missions of Our Military in the New Period of the New Century”

1. Help to guarantee the Party’s ruling position.
2. Provide a “strong security guarantee” during this crucial period of China’s national development.
3. Safeguard national interests, *including “not only ... the security of our territorial land, seas, and airspace ... but [also] ... our maritime, space, and electromagnetic spectrum security.”*
4. Uphold world peace and “promote mutual development,” *partly through military activities.*

“maritime, space, and electromagnetic spectrum security.” Implied in these expanded security spheres is the point that China’s military may be required to go further afield than ever before to protect national interests. The mission devoted to world peace and development is notable in that it suggests that the PLA has a role to play in meeting these goals – in other words, that military power and participation constitute an important instrument for taking on a more active and visible role on the world stage.

Echoing one of the participants in the first panel, this speaker noted that national pride may well also be driving PLAN anti-piracy operations. While many Chinese believe that China is already an important – and increasingly central – international player, the Chinese navy is arguably less capable than other navies in the Asia-Pacific region. The desire to show that China’s military is “catching up” with the nation’s other growing capabilities may help to explain why China would deploy its vessels on this challenging operational mission.

Finally, China’s participation in anti-piracy operations could indicate a *shift in its long-term security priorities*. One speaker suggested that a growing focus on MOOTW – which include anti-piracy operations – is indicative of a China that is starting to look beyond Taiwan. This would be consistent with other public statements, such as the PRC 2008 Defense White Paper, which downplayed cross-Strait concerns in favor of newer, non-traditional security threats.

One panelist suggested a possible driver for this shift might be increased confidence in the possibility of a non-

military solution on Taiwan. In such a case, the PLA might seek other missions as justification for its modernization and expansion. The perceived need to participate in long-term international missions far from home could provide one such justification.

One possible implication of this shift – combined with the PLA's improved capabilities overall – could be more rapid and enthusiastic participation in future multilateral, global missions. Thus, for instance, China might be more likely to participate in humanitarian relief operations in the future than it was following the 2004 tsunami.

Participation will, in the long run, aid the PLAN's modernization process.

Finally, one panelist noted that the PLAN's operational and deterrent capabilities will certainly benefit from its deployment to the HOA region.

- The panelist pointed out that the task force has already shown itself to be quite capable: the two destroyers China has sent to the HOA region are equipped with sophisticated weaponry, and the replenishment ship is able to provide the destroyers with fuel, ammunition, food and water, and spare parts. (China's task force will, nonetheless, remain reliant on China's shore-based resources for additional fuel, spare parts, and personnel transfer.) Reports of the task force's operations indicate that it is performing in a well-planned, competent manner.
- The speaker also suggested that participation in these operations will almost certainly result in the PLAN's

increased expertise and experience in operations, logistics, command and control, and interagency cooperation.

- Most significantly, this deployment will serve to increase the PLAN's confidence in its capabilities.

"This operation will contribute in a major way to the transformation of the PLA Navy from a coastal defense force to one capable of operating effectively at long ranges from home base."

Panel Three: Implications for the United States

The final panel brought together policy experts from the Departments of State and Defense, to discuss how the United States has reacted to China's unprecedented participation in these activities, and what opportunities and risks this participation brings to the United States.

Overall, the panelists' reaction to China's participation in anti-piracy operations was overwhelmingly positive. Indeed, one panelist said that deciding to support China's participation in the Gulf of Aden/HoA region was "possibly the easiest decision we've ever made" in U.S.-China military-to-military interactions. The speakers noted several encouraging implications of China's anti-piracy operations:

The PLAN's participation in anti-piracy missions signals China's willingness to cooperate on global issues of mutual interest. This is particularly important, panelists noted, because the U.S. will increasingly need China's help on a number of global and regional issues – both military and non-military – ranging from global economic and environmental challenges, to regional hotspots such as Pakistan and Afghanistan. On many diplomatic issues, one speaker pointed out, U.S.-China interactions have, until now, largely taken place in the context of the UN Security Council, and would be aided by more continuous interaction in a broader arena. Creating "habits of cooperation," as one speaker put it, can only make those other tasks easier. Another noted that such operations provide an opportunity for the U.S. to continue to "challenge China to participate as a responsible stakeholder"

on global issues, and to provide positive feedback when it does so.

Missions such as these provide ongoing contact between the United States and China to supplement formal military-to-military relations. Speakers noted that the anti-piracy operations have allowed members of both militaries to interact in ways that were never before possible. As one pointed out, this is the first occasion when warships from the two nations have coordinated non-exercise operations. Naval cooperation off the Horn of Africa has allowed for an unprecedented degree of contact, particularly in the operational and tactical arenas. Indeed, as one panelist pointed out, interaction at sea is easier in some ways, because it does not take place in any one nation's territory; members of the different crews can visit one another's ships and interact more informally.

Moreover, such cooperative operations allow the two militaries to continue to interact *even when formal military-to-military relations are shaky* – and thus to maintain a degree of communication even during difficult periods. This is particularly notable now, after October 2008, when formal bilateral mil-mil relations were suspended in response to the U.S. statement of intended arms sales to Taiwan.

Finally, these ongoing interactions allow the U.S. Navy to familiarize the PLA leadership with U.S. views on global issues, to demonstrate professionalism and to give Chinese personnel first-hand exposure to the U.S. military. As one speaker noted, the future leaders of the PLAN are likely to have operational

"This sort of [operational] cooperation is our chance to possibly influence the next generation of PLA leaders."

experience – and hence are likely to be interested in and influenced by operational interactions with the U.S. and other nations.

At the same time, panelists acknowledged that some might find China's participation

worrisome, due both to the potential for the PLAN to improve its operational capabilities, and to potential risks from closer contact between the U.S. and Chinese militaries. Panelists stressed that such risks need to be mitigated even as overall cooperation is encouraged.

Finally, participants noted that China's anti-piracy missions raise several larger points worth serious consideration:

The PLAN's expanded portfolio raises questions about how the U.S. Navy should best interact with China to support U.S. national interests. Panelists provided several suggestions on how the bilateral relationship – both military and diplomatic – should be managed as China's national interests, power, and influence grow. One noted that the U.S.-China relationship should be considered in the context of other U.S. relationships in the Asian region, saying that the strength of U.S. regional alliances remains an important element in the U.S. ability to work productively with China. A second pointed out that the current positive interactions provide a good opportunity to encourage China's participation in other multinational maritime activities, and in building better legal frameworks for naval cooperation. A third noted that the PLAN's deployment reminds us that Chinese

military capabilities and intentions are expanding whether or not the U.S. likes it – hence, "what we need are procedures, rules of the game. This is an opportunity for the U.S. to start thinking about these."

Incidents in recent months remind us that China is taking on multiple images and roles on the world stage. Just a few months after the PLAN deployed its first warships to the Gulf of Aden in the name of international cooperation, other Chinese vessels harassed USS *Impeccable* in international waters in the South China Sea. While some might view these actions as inconsistent, one speaker countered that in fact they represent a *continuum* of Chinese military activities. The speaker suggested that it is unproductive to think of China as *either* a threat *or* a partner – rather, China may play both roles in the U.S.'s future, and thus U.S. planning should take the entire spectrum of Chinese military activities into account.

We should keep in mind that China may still overreach or "overplay its hand." Finally, panelists noted that the increased capabilities that the PLAN has displayed in its anti-piracy operations do not mean that China's navy is where it wants to be. We can expect to see more efforts to modernize, as well as setbacks along the way. For this reason, noted one speaker, it is important for the U.S. to maintain a strong military, economic, and political presence in the region. At the same time, said another, the U.S. must understand that conveying messages clearly remains a challenging task: "Communication is an issue not of [linguistic] translation but of cultural translation."



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20 March 2009

Agenda

1245-1300 Registration

1300-1310 Opening Remarks

1310-1410 Panel One: Setting the Stage—An Overview of Piracy off the Horn of Africa

This panel will examine the current piracy situation, describe anti-piracy efforts to date, and discuss China's interests in the region.

Speakers:

- Dr. Martin Murphy, Senior Fellow, Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments
- Commander Andrew Garlington, Maritime Security Branch of the Strategy and Policy Division, Deputy Chief of Naval Operations for Information, Plans and Strategy
- Julia Rosenfield, China Analyst, CNA

1410-1420 Break

1420-1510 Panel Two: Implications for China

This panel will address the political-military and operational dimensions of China's involvement in anti-piracy operations off the Horn of Africa.

Speakers:

- Daniel Hartnett, China Analyst, CNA
- Dr. Bernard Cole, Professor of International History, National War College

1510-1520 Break

1520-1620 Panel Three: Implications for the United States

The final panel will provide an overview of U.S. government reactions to China's participation in these anti-piracy operations.

Speakers:

- David B. Shear, Director, Office of Chinese and Mongolian Affairs, U.S. Department of State
- Lieutenant Colonel Sande Schlesinger, Senior Country Director for China, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Asian and Pacific Security Affairs
- Gerard Roncolato, Deputy Director, Strategy and Policy Division, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations
- Lieutenant Colonel Eric Barto, China Branch Chief, Strategic Plans and Policy, Joint Staff

1620-1630 Closing Remarks



Cover photo:

Sailors salute during a ceremony held before a Chinese naval fleet, including two destroyers and a supply ship from the South China Sea Fleet, set off from Sanya, Hainan province. The fleet would have about 800 crew, including 70 special operations troops, and would join multinational patrols of the Gulf of Aden and waters off the coast of Somalia, the official Xinhua news agency said. Picture taken December 26, 2008.

Reuters/China Daily Information Corp. (CDIC)

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